

Short Biography of Virginia

Today we have come together to say goodbye to Virginia, one of the last survivors of her generation. We all knew Virginia in different ways, as mother, grandmother, cousin, aunt or friend and we each have our own special memories of her.

Virginia was born in 1919 in Birkenhead; the third child and only daughter of a Kathleen and James Barker. This middleclass family were unconventional in the fact that they eschewed religion of any sort. Her parents found it difficult to decide on a name for her, she was registered without one, and for the first few months of her life she was known as 'Babe' – a name her aunt Nora, mother and brothers continued to use for the rest of their lives. She held many memories of this now lost world. She remembered her Victorian grandmothers and great aunt Addy. One of her earliest memories was of her grandmother Catherine Munday hiring a carriage to drive in Birkenhead park as birthday treat for the little girl. She also remembered the General Strike and the social inequalities associated with it. In her infancy she spent much time in the company of the family's domestic employees - a nursemaid, a housemaid and a one-eyed cook, all of whom she was very fond of. She described her childhood as rather lonely - her two elder brothers were sent away to boarding school and she was left as the only occupant of the nursery. She was not encouraged to make friends with other children and was sent out to play in the garden with her beloved Laddie for company. Laddie, a black and white collie dog had been bought by her mother from a tramp for the then not inconsiderable sum of 10 shillings. Her relationship with Laddie was the start of a lifelong love of animals, particularly dogs and cats.

Virginia went to Birkenhead High School and was the only member of her family to matriculate (the equivalent of modern 'A' levels), and the only one to go to University when, encouraged by her mother, she went up during the war years to University College London to read history, although she later changed to psychology. She rode well and was sporty and played in both school and university cricket, netball and lacrosse teams. She graduated in 1941 with an upper second in anthropology, economics and psychology. Leaving home and going to university reinforced her social outlook and crystallized the left wing views that she held all her life. The war years were not easy times for anyone; Virginia was always concerned about her older brother Mead who was in Bomber Command – fortunately both her brothers and all her near relatives survived the War. After leaving university she worked for the Wartime Social Survey (Ministry of Information) first as an interviewer and later in charge of the Survey of Sickness. In 1946 she moved to work at the Royal Commission on Population where she met Grebby –

a larger than life scruffy Russian refugee with huge intelligence and lively wit. She remembered the gales of laughter that could be heard coming from his office. He, in his turn, remembered her as a rather stern looking young woman with long blond hair coiled in plaits around her ears. Their courtship was a surprise to their colleagues who were split into two groups – one thought she was wasting herself on him and the other that he was far too clever for her! That year was the first year that St Bartholomew's Hospital admitted women as medical students and Virginia applied for and was offered a place to read medicine at Barts. However, she did not take up the offer, because she married Grebby in December that year, and thought that she would be unable to complete the course because she was keen to start a family. I think that in later life she regretted turning down the opportunity to read medicine and I am sure that she would have made an excellent doctor.

Life with Grebby was not always a bed of roses. They worked 6 days a week, and his parents insisted on them visiting their Hendon flat every Sunday. This did not leave much time for the young couple. Small things rankled: all her life she reminded him how he had eaten her marmalade ration, and she told me that the only thing that kept her from leaving him in the first year of the marriage was the fact that she was too proud to go home to her mother and admit that she had made a mistake! However, she persevered and of course the marriage turned out to be a very long and extremely happy one. They acquired their first dog – a poodle named Topsy – and in 1950 Michael was born, followed by Peter in 1952 and Kate in 1956. Those years were ones of domesticity, childrearing and dogwalking and of supporting Grebby as his career moved upwards and northwards.

In the 1960s, with the children growing up a little, Virginia started part-time work as a lecturer in Education at the Yorkshire College of Housecraft (usually known as the 'Pud School') which was to become the Leeds Polytechnic and later still Leeds Metropolitan University. They were very happy years whilst Grebby was Professor in Leeds. The two of them had a large circle of friends amongst the academics. There was a lot of social activity and parties which Virginia greatly enjoyed. She ran the house and family, cooked, shopped, gardened and learnt to drive and was busy and contented.

In 1970 they moved back to the south of England when Grebby became Principal of the Civil Service College in Sunningdale. Virginia found employment as a psychiatric social worker at Holloway Sanatorium – work that she found both interesting and demanding. It stimulated her interest in mental health issues and in the mid 1970s she became active in forming the Runnymede Mental Health Association. The aim was to give social support within the community, companionship, counselling and

advice to those who had, or were recovering from some form of mental illness. She was President of the Runnymede Mental Health Association through the 1980s, with Grebby as treasurer now in a supporting role. During this period, Virginia and others conceived the idea of setting up a day centre for people with mental health problems. With tremendous enthusiasm, she set about raising funds, dealing with bureaucracy and supervising its construction and the completed day centre in Egham was named 'Virginia Lodge' in her honour. This was a huge and lasting achievement and it continues to go from strength to strength. Clients of Virginia Lodge and the residents of Waspe Farm, remember Virginia with much affection and she looked back on this period with great pleasure and satisfaction.

In 1992 Grebby, Virginia and her productive bees moved to Kidlington to be near Peter and Kate. Grebby was already showing signs of the Parkinson's disease which was to affect his last years so badly. Virginia made friends and established a place for herself in the local community very rapidly. She was active in setting up a local carers group in Kidlington which is still flourishing. She enjoyed her opera, small garden and the university of the third age. However, the years of Grebby's declining health were increasingly difficult but she managed to care for him devotedly until almost the end of his life.

Sadly, as a widow she had only a short time before she herself declined in health. Fortunately Harriet and Peter were able to offer her a granny flat in their garden and the care and support which she increasingly needed as her memory became ever more confused. Despite this decline, these last two and half years in Wheatley were very happy and she was able to participate in the quiet life of a family with two teenagers. She was also able to enjoy other things – music, visits from relatives and friends, walks, quizzes at her local day centre, a nightly glass of sherry (Grebby would never have approved), her food and the garden and her birds. Whilst never a particularly 'hands-on' granny she took a great deal of pleasure from the company and achievements of her seven grandchildren. The last two months though were a great struggle – the activities of daily life, walking, washing, dressing, even eating and drinking became a huge effort, and she said several times that she had lived too long. Death came as a release for her and we are glad that she was able to die at home in her own bed with her family beside her and before the worst indignities of dementia had overtaken her.

Virginia had many fine qualities – she was a warm and loving wife, mother and grandmother. She had a strong sense of family ties and kept in contact with all her relatives, of whom she was very fond. She had many long and lasting friendships and a gift for being able to get on with people from all walks of life – alas most of her friends are either dead or too frail and elderly to join us today. We shall all miss her, but

this is not an occasion for grief for her death was timely - life had no more pleasures to offer her and we are glad that she is at rest.

We finish with the words of Betty Fowler who after an 80 year friendship wrote "The little girl I played with, the grown woman with a responsible job, the bride of her beloved husband, the traveler, the instigator of good work for the underprivileged, and the faithful friend - goodbye".